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Fall and Winter Care of Strawberries

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FALL AND WINTER CARE OF STRAWBERRIES

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This is the last of the regular monthly lessons. Since there are two things left to be done with your strawberry beds this fall, we feel that both should be taken up in this last lesson. These two things are fall care of everbearing varieties and winter protection by mulches.

Fall Care of Everbearing Varieties

All club members who have planted everbearing varieties should remember that they are not as hardy as some of the common varieties. They require higher culture than spring bearing sorts. They also need a richer soil and more moisture during their prolonged bearing season. One cannot expect them to bear successful crops during extremely dry falls unless artificially watered. As far as South Dakota conditions are concerned there is but one thing lacking for everbearing strawberries and that is an occasional lack of moisture in the fall. Where everbearers are given the proper care there are many cases here in South Dakota where remarkable crops were borne until the ground was covered with snow in November. This has occurred both in the eastern and western part of the state.

Since moisture is the limiting factor, the club member should manage to get water on his bed of everbearers if it is possible. Even irrigation from the ordinary pumps will do wonders with a small home berry patch during dry falls. If the sprinkling system is used, it would be best to do so in the evening or at night as sometimes the leaves will burn when sprinkled during hot days.

Everbearing strawberries that have borne up until cold weather should be very carefully mulched as they are more tender than the common varieties. The reason for this is that all of the vitality of the plant has gone to fruit production and no time has been used for it to become hardened up for the winter.

Mulches for Strawberries

Strawberry growers in a state as far north as ours must practice winter mulching if they expect any degree of success. The objects of a mulch are several. It prevents the plants from being "heaved" out of the ground by alternate freezing and thawing. It protects the plants against excessive cold weather. It conserves the moisture in the soil by hindering evaporation. It allows the

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surface of the soil to remain in a loose friable condition. It lessens weed growth by smothering out the young weed seedlings. In many cases a mulch adds valuable plant food to the bed. In the spring the mulch can be used around the bearing plants to keep the fruit clean.

Dangers of Alternate Freezing and Thawing.

In most cases, winter injury of unmulched plants is caused by alternate freezing and thawing rather than by actual low temperatures. When the soil freezes up in the evening after a thaw during the day, both the soil and the plants are pushed upward because water expands upon freezing. If this takes place repeatedly, the plants are literally torn from their roots and "heaved" up, resulting in their death. On clay soils, strawberry plants have been known to have been lifted six or eight inches during a single winter. Winter heaving is always worst on heavy soils especially when poorly drained.

It is evident that anything that will prevent those daily thaws will prevent this "heaving of the plants" and here is where the winter mulch gets in its valuable work. From this you can readily see that the main purpose of the mulch is not to prevent the freezing of the plants but rather to prevent the thawing of the soil during sunny days. Because of this the winter mulch should not be applied until the ground is frozen up in the fall. It is not well to wait too long after the fall freezes as some "heaving" may occur during any period in the fall when there are cold nights and warm days.

Dangers of Low Temperature and Drying Out

Here in South Dakota it is common to experience very low temperatures without snow cover. We also occasionally have very dry winters. When these two conditions come simultaneously, (that is cold and dry) strawberry plants are very apt to be seriously injured. Strawberry plants give off a little moisture even in winter and if thoroughly dried out, they will winter-kill under extreme conditions. A heavy winter mulch will prevent this loss of moisture from the leaves to a large extent, thus making the plants less susceptible to winter-killing.

Materials for Mulching

In choosing the material to be used for mulching, the cost and availability should be taken into consideration. Any coarse vegetable material that will not pack too tightly over the plants can be used.

Strawy horse manure has been used, but its objections are that it tends to pack too tightly and is very apt to introduce noxious weeds. If only fine manure can be secured, this should not be used as it would be very apt to smother the plants.

Straw is probably the best material to use under South Dakota conditions because it is always available and cheap. Wheat straw is better than oat or barley straw because it does not pack

so tightly. If the straw is badly filled with chaff, it should be shaken out thoroughly before applying to the bed.

Corn fodder makes an excellent mulch. One bundle is laid each side of the row and a third on top. There is usually plenty of open spaces in cornstalks to eliminate any danger from smothering. Shreded corn fodder makes an excellent strawberry mulch, but is too expensive.

In many localities wild prairie hay makes an excellent mulch. This wild hay is usually quite free from weed seeds. The leaves from our deciduous trees makes good mulch, but is inclined to pack a little too much.

How Deep Should the Mulch Be?

This far north the proper depth to mulch is quite a problem. The mulch must be applied heavy enough to prevent winter-killing and yet light enough to avoid smothering the plants. For South Dakota conditions we will say the mulch should be about four inches deep after settling, which means fully six inches when loose. If your mulching material is of fine texture, the mulch should not be so deep because of the danger of smothering.